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THE AMERICAN DRAMATIST.

ABOUT once a year, for a number of years, I have listened to a cry for the coming of the American dramatist—as if he had not only no existence, but had never existed ; when the fact is that the American dramatist has already made a very respectable showing, and continues periodically to make his existence felt. We have had a national drama almost from the time that we commenced to have a national existence—although a chapter upon the American *historical* drama might be made as brief as the famous chapter on Iceland snakes. There once existed an ambition in that direction among playwrights, and a taste among playgoers for it ; but both have died out ; although “Putnam, or the Iron Son of ’76” and “Marion, or the Swamp Angel,” with others of that kind, were favorites as recently as a quarter of a century ago, particularly about the Fourth of July, Evacuation Day, etc. A peculiarity of this class of national drama was that it necessitated the keeping in stock, at all regular theaters, of an actor who could make up as the “Father of his Country” and appear in tableaux, or the inevitable red-fire apotheosis. But that sort of American drama went out with the pit boys and the volunteer fire department, and its place has not been filled. In remote rural districts the appetite for it still lingers, and is satisfied by one or more traveling companies remotely connected with some Grand Army Post, which give romantic melodramas “founded upon incidents of the late war.” The banishment of the native historical drama from the cities is easily accounted for. Such a play is nothing without extravagant patriotic sentiment, and the controlling taste at the present day is against sentiment in most forms, patriotism in that form, and extravagance in any form.

To prove that we have had our Native Dramatist during our whole national existence, it is not necessary to go over all the

minor playwrights whose names would be wholly unfamiliar to playgoers of to-day. Willis's "Tortesa the Usurer" may be entirely forgotten, but Howard Payne's tragedy of "Brutus" and his comedy of "Charles the Second" are favorite revivals to-day in England as well as in this country. George Miles's "De Soto" and "Señor Valiente" may be unremembered; but Boker's "Francesca da Rimini" and "Betrothal" are still on the list of acted dramas. Bird's "Gladiator" is as well known as Edwin Forrest, though his "Broker of Bogota" is less often seen, good play though it be. Conrad's "Jack Cade" and Stone's "Metamora" occasionally emerge from retirement, and, when the prevailing demand for a lighter spirit in the play wears away—as all fashions do change—there are plays by Mrs. Julia Ward Howe and Mrs. Mowatt and other native dramatists, which will bear taking down from the prompter's shelf, and dusting off, and redressing for the stage.

These were native dramatists of the generations that are past; the present sees a multitude of clever writers whose ambition has not led them, always, to do better than write to order for "stars;" but the authors of "Saratoga" and "Young Mrs. Winthrop," of "Conscience" and "Esmeralda," of "Victor Durand" and "The Twins," of "The False Friend" and "Our First Families," of "The Mighty Dollar" and "My Partner," and others, might be enumerated if there were any reasons for making a show of numbers; while, among writers who are not Americans, but who have contributed toward the building up of our native drama, are to be named—Boucicault, whose "Octoroon" and "Rip Van Winkle" and "Belle Lamar" are genuinely American, and Brougham, with his thoroughly national burlesques of "Pocahontas" and "Columbus," both too good to be so infrequently acted.

If we were to put the question to the Librarian of Congress, with whom the titles of new plays are lodged, as to his opinion of the prospects of the national drama, he would tell us that, so far as the growth of native playwrights is concerned, they were never more hopeful; he would assure us that the drama must be indigenous, for unfailing crops of it spring up in all parts of the country. Most of the seed, however, falls on very stony managerial ground, and much of the growth is choked by foreign plants. What is to be regretted is, that so few American authors of distinction are willing to try their fortunes in this field; and what is most to be

deplored is, that the few who are willing are not disposed to pursue a plan of collaboration, which alone assures success to beginners. By this plan or system the writer of clever dialogue assists the inventor of interesting plot and of striking incident and character ; or writers of equal invention and wit assist each other in that fuller development of the possibilities of plot or situation which one mind alone is commonly unable to accomplish ; or, and this is most important, if not indispensable, dramatists of unquestioned experience help to shape for the stage the productions of play-writers of little or no experience.

To this system of collaboration we may ascribe the perfection existing abroad in the art of dramatic composition. There are few foreign dramatists of to-day who did not commence writing in literary partnership with some congenial spirit. Everything gains by the friendly emulation : the wit of the lines, the plausibility of the story and the wealth of the incident. It is easy, of course, to point out dramatic authors abroad who, unaided, produce marvelous dramatic works ; but I do not hesitate to say that they have all had a helper at the start, whose name may not appear on their title-pages, but whose work is quite evident to the practiced eye. And, where this help may have been disdained, its absence is also discernible. The general fault of dramatists is, that the last strokes of the brush are negligent, or the pace is not kept up to the end. The particular fault is, that the solitary writer has a hobby or wastes his efforts in attempts to illustrate phases of life and character which have no general interest. Most clever men have veins of conceit that mar their fine work, or they pursue a weak idea to the verge of absurdity. How effectually the clear, common sense of a friendly co-laborer, who has no weakness for your weakness, would cut out all that ! Of course, you have your revenge upon his puerilities and vagaries : that is the advantage of joint work.

Unless a man be born with a genius for dramatic writing—that is to say, with the art of conveying his whole idea by the *action* of his characters and the language natural to such action, and be a born stage-manager or actor also, he cannot, by unaided effort, produce, at first, a tolerable play. This being the case, our novelists or magazine workers, who feel tempted to write for the stage, might approach the question of remuneration with less confidence than they would feel in offering a new novel to a publisher. The risks

of publishers and managers bear no decent proportion to each other. If a publisher risks five hundred dollars, in putting forth a new book, a manager risks ten thousand dollars in producing a new play, for there is involved, not only the cost of getting up scenery, costumes, and furnishings for the new piece, but the loss (in case of failure) on the running expenses of rent, salaries, etc., before he can replace the doomed play by another; and these seldom fall short (in a first-class theater) of four thousand dollars a week. I touch upon this point because I believe we shall not have a flourishing growth of the native drama until all the best native writers make an attempt at dramatic cultivation, and make it with so much sincerity that they will take advice as to planting the seed, training the shoots, and, above all, will wait for the fruit to ripen before they pluck it.

Possibly our national drama, from a literary point of view, will reach its best period when native writers vie with each other in illustrating native character and contemporaneous fashions and follies. It does not seem easy to get our best playwrights to practice in this field of exertion. In selecting plots and characters they have a decided bias, acquired from reading the masterpieces of modern fiction—these being mostly foreign: and so, haughty nobles and baseborn and penniless, but proud suitors, and irresistible colonels or delightfully witty majors or captains, give color and brilliancy to their pictures and furnish high tints at cheap rates. Foreign wars of conquest enable the Claude Melnottes to wipe away the stain of dishonor and come back with glory and unexplained cash; princes, and their assumed powers, are perilously convenient for cutting the Gordian knot into which the dramatist generally contrives to tie himself by the end of the fourth act; ancient nobility furnishes the thousand themes for the *Vere de Vere* dramas or the village maiden and elopement episodes; and so on. All this must be given up, of course, when the native dramatist closes his wistful eyes upon the Old World and opens them upon the New. But why not give a picture of the new aping the old? Some attempts have been made to combine the old and the new in one picture—for instance, by placing the scene in a foreign country, among the very bluest-blooded grandees, and then precipitating a wild, whooping American girl upon them to amaze and bewilder the foolish foreigners. But is there any real necessity for laying such a scene in a foreign country? Any respectable New

York, or Boston, or Philadelphia family, would be equally amazed and distressed by the behavior of such a girl. There is one sacrifice in giving up the old world and its works which our native dramatists find it hard to make—and that is the duel! The fascination and breathless interest that cling to the combat seem to be irresistible. The duel dies very hard out of the native drama. But, then, you may have an affair of honor without fighting, for that is quite customary among our best young bloods, I believe; though it would require a master dramatist to excite serious interest with such an episode. Of course our stage is occupied with innumerable plays purporting to afford studies of native character—such as “Solon Shingle,” “Davy Crockett,” “Colonel Sellers,” “Gilflory,” and so forth, but these are mere outlines of plays that might be written. They have no literary value and serve no purpose in the structure of the national drama, because they perish with the actor who has given them substance. There is no way to perpetuate the convulsive effects of the “gags,” or impromptus of the comic star. The dramatist who is coming will undoubtedly do better. He is, perhaps, coming up as a boy now, taking in his sustenance from the drama of to-day, sitting in his gallery seat and sending his tap roots down into the modern stage for what is best to feed his growth. He is not to be despised, that silent, observant, brooding boy sitting in the gallery, be he native or naturalized.

The future American dramatist must belong to one of the classes enumerated above, and cannot altogether differ from all who have gone before him. What will be his work? Shall he embody, in a series of historical dramas, our national events, or satirize, in comedy, our native foibles, or work into dramatic shape the sensational narratives of our daily papers and call it a picture of American life? All this has been done. Perhaps the new man is to do it better. But our national drama will be established without restriction as to subject or plot. The coming dramatist will be indifferent on that score. His fancy will roam, at its own sweet will, for song or story to crystallize into dramatic form. Neither Shakspeare nor any of his contemporaries, nor Corneille nor Racine, nor Schiller nor Goethe made the national drama of their native lands by the delineation of national character only. Originality of plot and incident seem, by the common consent of the highest dramatic censors in every age, to count for nothing in the estimate of literary pretensions. Molière deemed all obligations for borrowed ma-

terial to be discharged by the mere admission of them: "What was good I took, whenever I found it; be satisfied that I acknowledge it." We must not exact of American dramatists more than has been demanded of its dramatists by any country. They have been permitted to draw their themes and their characters from foreign sources; their praise was for doing their work well, and vindicating the claims of the national literature by their genius. Boker might have idealized the Kentucky tragedy instead of the Rimini drama, and Bird might have made his Spartacus an Indian chief—but our national theater has lost nothing by their omission. The present masterpieces of the stage, in every tongue, are pictures of the passions of mankind in general, rather than attempts at national portrait painting; and nothing in modern times seems to belong to the latter class except a thoroughly bad modern French drama; and even this, I hope and suspect, to be an overdrawn and distorted picture.

As the prospects of the American drama depend largely upon the first efforts of the coming American dramatists, the press may be said to be the arbiter of its destinies. Let it pause, therefore, before assuming the rôle of Herod, in ordering a new slaughter of the innocents. Those first attempts may, and probably will be, partial failures, notwithstanding the efforts of actors and managers. The writings of new men in any field, and of the best of writers in a new field, are like new brands of wine: the first taste seems strange and nearly always repellent. It is the privilege of the experts of the press, who recognize the merit that lies in freshness of style, and boldness in laudable attempt, to make the public and the author better acquainted. The disposition to do this is more common now than it once was. It took a strong constitution to survive the attacks on a new play by a new man some years ago. But nearly all the best-known dramatists have had to submit to the Donnybrook reception given to new heads, and have had to nurse the wounds of failure in silence. Sardou was scarred like a veteran of defeat long before he made his first hit. So were Bulwer and Knowles. Gilbert had many a fall before he learned to keep his feet, and Tom Robertson's history was a similar one.

There is a cheering prospect for the American drama, as far as the actors and the theaters are concerned. The American stage to-day possesses native born or thoroughly naturalized artists, who have no superiors in their respective lines. The tragic, the comic,

the eccentric, the delineator of the easy, well-bred man or woman of society and of every other grade of life, are now to the manner born. Not many years ago the companies that acted in our theaters were largely English. Here and there twinkled an American "star," but the firmament was studded with foreign constellations. The development of the histrionic talent in the United States augurs well for the future dramatic literature. So many clever men and women must not only produce but must inspire genius in that direction. It would take a page to mention even the more prominent among our native actors and actresses who are capable of giving to the ideal of the dramatist breath and motion. We are richer, perhaps, in comedy than tragedy, but the comic power is so closely allied to deep feeling and ready sympathy that there are few of our artists who cannot call forth a tear as readily as a smile.

But the brightest prospect of the American drama is found in the present position of the theater in this country, with reference to the social world. Our advance in that direction is almost incalculable. The best portion of the community has taken possession of the theater, as it ought to take possession of all public amusements, and has made it its own. The purification of the temple of the drama has been so thoroughly effected that the worthiest people find it worthy of their affectionate regard. From the topmost gallery down, respectability reigns. The "third tier" and the pit of thirty years ago, with their bars and their loungers, have disappeared. There is no attraction for the vicious. The constant patrons of the drama belong to the class of people who are strictest in the performance of every duty, moral and social. I overheard the following colloquy, lately, between two gentlemen of gravity and respectability :

First Gentleman : I used to be very fond of the theater, but I have not been inside of one for twenty-five years.

Second Gentleman : Indeed ! Why ?

First Gentleman : Not because of the drama itself, but I fear the associations—the people my sons and daughters would have to meet there.

Second Gentleman : Pardon the remark, but you speak exactly like a person who has not been inside a theater for twenty-five years.

First Gentleman : How so ?

Second Gentleman : If your sons and daughters went to the

theater *now*, the people they would meet would be my sons and daughters and those of your friends, with their parents and grandparents.

In fact, those who now rail against the theater, on the ground of its associations, *attack*, not the players but their patrons—the best classes of the community. If plays are found which have no elevating influence, or exhibitions of a demoralizing tendency, the drama is not to be condemned for that, any more than the press is to be condemned because there are foolish books printed.

To sum up, I should say the prospects of our national drama are bright, because: 1st, our theaters, as places of resort, are wholesome, and are controlled by the best classes; 2d, the development of dramatic capability and power in the art of acting is marked and increasing in Americans; 3d, our native authors are numerous and industrious, wanting but the resolution and perseverance of American writers in other departments to systematically help the native drama and not leave its development too much to chance; 4th, the standard of the best management is high except where theaters are managed purely as commercial speculations. Even the latter would be well enough if the commercial instinct were present as in other business undertakings, and required the employment of a competent artistic head.

AUGUSTIN DALY.